



Cameroon

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were a few incidents of religious discrimination by private actors. In addition, some religious groups face societal pressure and discrimination within their regions, although this may reflect ethnic more than religious differences. In general, persons of different religions cohabitate peacefully.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 183,568 square miles, and its population is approximately 16.5 million. Muslim centers and Christian churches of various denominations operate freely throughout the country. Approximately 40 percent of the population is at least nominally Christian, approximately 20 percent is at least nominally Muslim, and approximately 40 percent practices traditional indigenous religions or no religion. The Christian population is divided approximately equally between Catholic and Protestant denominations.

Christians are concentrated chiefly in the southern and western provinces; however, Muslims are found in large numbers in every province, and there is significant internal migration within the country. Large cities have significant populations of every religion, with mosques and churches often located near each other. The two anglophone provinces of the western region largely are Protestant; the francophone provinces of the southern and western regions largely are Catholic. In the northern provinces, the locally dominant Fulani (or Peuhl) ethnic group is mostly Muslim, but the overall population is fairly evenly mixed between Muslims, Christians, and animists, each often living in their own communities. The Bamoun ethnic group of the West Province is largely Muslim. Traditional indigenous religions are practiced in rural areas throughout the country but rarely are practiced publicly in cities, in part because many indigenous religions are intrinsically local in character.

Missionary groups are present throughout the country, including Roman Catholic, Muslim, the Baha'i Faith, Baptist, Presbyterian, evangelic Protestants, Methodist, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unification Church, Seventh-day Adventists, New Church of God, and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. There is no official state religion.

The Law on Religious Congregations governs relations between the Government and religious groups. Religious groups must be approved by and registered with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization (MINAT) to function legally. There were no reports that the Government refused to register any group; however, the process can take a number of years. It is illegal for a religious group to operate without official recognition, but the law prescribes no specific penalties. Although official recognition confers no general tax benefits, it allows religious groups to receive real estate as tax-free gifts and legacies for the conduct of their activities.

To register, a religious denomination must fulfill the legal requirement to qualify as a religious congregation. This definition

includes "any group of natural persons or corporate bodies whose vocation is divine worship" or "any group of persons living in community in accordance with a religious doctrine." The denomination then submits a file to the MINAT. The file must include a request for authorization, a copy of the group's charter describing planned activities, and the names and respective functions of the group's officials. The Minister reviews the file and sends it to the Presidency with a recommendation for a positive or negative decision. The President generally follows the recommendation of the Minister, and authorization is granted by a presidential decree. The approval process may take up to several years, due primarily to administrative delays.

The only religious groups known to be registered are Christian and Muslim groups and the Baha'i Faith. According to MINAT statistics released in 2002, there are 38 officially registered denominations, most of which are Christian. There also are numerous unregistered small religious groups that operate illegally but freely. The Government does not register traditional religious groups, stating that the practice of traditional religion is a private concern observed by members of a particular ethnic or kinship group or the residents of a particular locality.

Disputes between or within registered religious groups about control of places of worship, schools, real estate, or financial assets are resolved primarily by the MINAT rather than by the judiciary.

Missionary groups are present in the country and operate without impediment. The licensing requirements for foreign groups are the same as those for domestic religious denominations.

Several religious denominations operate primary and secondary schools. Although post-secondary education continues to be dominated by state institutions, private schools affiliated with religious denominations, including Catholic, Protestant, and Qur'anic schools, have been among the country's best schools at the primary and secondary levels for many years. The Ministry of Education is charged by law with ensuring that private schools run by religious groups meet the same standards as state-operated schools in terms of curriculum, infrastructure, and teacher training. For schools affiliated with religious groups, the Sub-Department of Confessional Education of the Ministry's Department of Private Education performs this oversight function. School attendance--public, private, or parochial--is mandatory through junior high school.

The Catholic Church operates two of the country's few modern private printing presses (one in Yaounde and one in Douala) and publishes a weekly newspaper, L'Effort Camerounais.

A 2000 government decree requires potential commercial radio broadcasters to submit a licensing application, pay a fee when the application is approved, and pay an annual licensing fee. The Government has been slow in granting authorization; consequently, there are many illegal radio stations operating in Cameroon. Two private religious radio stations that had been broadcasting illegally--the Pentecostal Radio Bonne Nouvelle and Radio Reine, the latter managed by a Catholic priest although not officially sponsored by the Catholic Church--continued to broadcast while awaiting official authorization. Radio Veritas has temporary authorization to broadcast and has been broadcasting without incident.

The state-sponsored television station, CRTV, carries 2 hours of Christian programming on Sunday mornings, normally an hour of Catholic Mass and an hour from a Protestant church. There is also one broadcast hour dedicated to Islam on Friday evenings. State-sponsored radio broadcasts Christian and Muslim religious services on a regular basis, and both the radio and television stations periodically broadcast religious ceremonies on national holidays or during other national events.

Christian and Muslim religious holidays are celebrated as national holidays. These include Good Friday (Christian), Ascension Day (Christian), Assumption Day (Christian), Christmas Day (Christian), the Feast of the Lamb (Muslim), and the End of Ramadan (Muslim). These holidays do not negatively affect non-observers.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In the past, government officials have disapproved of and questioned criticism of the Government by religious institutions and leaders; however, there were no reports that government officials used force to suppress such criticism.

The practice of witchcraft is a criminal offense under the national penal code; however, persons generally are prosecuted for this offense only in conjunction with some other offense, such as murder. Witchcraft traditionally has been a common explanation for diseases of unknown origin.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion by the Government. In addition, the Government responded promptly to assist the U.S. Embassy in the case of the forced conversion of American citizens by a private actor. In January 2004, the Embassy assisted an American citizen in securing physical custody over her two American citizen children, who were being held by their Cameroon-born father on a family compound and forced to worship a family elder and perform invasive purification rituals. Following the Embassy's intervention in cooperation with law enforcement officials, the mother and children were repatriated to the United States. The religious leader of the group was detained pending formal charges but later released for lack of sufficient evidence. At the end of the period covered by this report, the compound was locked and no outside observers were admitted.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some religious groups faced societal pressures within their regions. In the northern provinces, especially in rural areas, societal discrimination by Muslims against Christians and persons who practice traditional indigenous religions continued.

In May 2004, a group of Muslim radicals circulated anti-Christian tracts in the North, Far North, and Adamaoua provinces. Both Muslim and Christian religious leaders in the area reacted quickly to identify the source of the tracts and encourage their congregations to respect religious diversity and promote religious tolerance. In April 2005, the Garoua assistant sub-divisional officer reported that a meeting with all the religious groups had been held the week before to discuss extremism in the area. The group reiterated their previous statement, asserting that it was non-residents who circulated the extremist tracts. Investigations were ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.

In 2003, a Catholic Church official in the Far North Province reported that Muslim "fundamentalists" who trained in Pakistan and Sudan were jeopardizing the usually good relationship between Muslims and Christians in the region. According to the official, these fundamentalists were gaining support, particularly among the youth, because of the high levels of poverty and unemployment in the northern provinces. While the official did not feel that fundamentalism had caused serious problems in the region, he recognized that relations between religious groups could deteriorate if the economic situation remains poor. The official also mentioned that some Christian groups were aggressively working to convert Muslims in the region.

In May 2004, Pastor Alombah Godlove was reportedly beaten and fined by the traditional ruler, or Fon, of his village for providing a Christian burial for a village elder in accordance with the deceased's will. The Fon believed that the elder, who was also a member of a traditional religious secret society, should have been buried with traditional rites. At the end of the period covered by this report, the case was under investigation by the National Commission on Human Rights.

Michel Atanga Effa and Gervais Balla, charged with the 2003 killing of German missionary Anton Probst, remained under preventive detention, pending trial, at the end of the period covered by this report.

At the end of the period covered by this report, the suspect accused of the 2001 killing of Appolinaire Ndi, a parish priest in the Yaounde diocese, remained in detention without a set trial date.

From time to time, the northern region suffers from ethnic tensions between the Fulani, an ethnic (or multi-ethnic) Muslim group that conquered most of the region 200 years ago, and the Kirdi, the descendants of groups that practiced traditional indigenous religions. The Fulani conquered or displaced many Kirdi as part of a westward expansion of Islam in Africa. Although some Kirdi subsequently adopted Islam, the Kirdi have remained socially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged relative to the Fulani. The slavery still practiced in parts of the north is reported to be largely enslavement of Kirdi (both Muslim and non-Muslim) by Fulani.

The multiplication of new unaffiliated religious groups, most of which are Protestant, has led established churches to vigorously denounce what they label "sects" or "cults." Leaders of established religious organizations characterize and denounce these "sects" as detrimental to societal peace and harmony. Some religious leaders reportedly warn congregations during major celebrations to beware of such groups.

Religious affiliation may influence political choice. In April 2005, an administration official from the North (Garoua) said that members of one of the leading political parties of the region openly stated that they could not vote for a Christian.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In 2004, the U.S. Embassy organized a panel discussion on "Islam and Religious Tolerance," excerpts of which were aired during two editions of the weekly television program "Understanding Islam." The Ambassador also reached out to the Muslim community by hosting an Iftar during Ramadan. Approximately 500 copies of the pamphlet "Muslim Life in America" were distributed to Muslim leaders throughout the country. The Embassy also provided regular assistance to the American Missionary community and consular repatriation services to American citizens in a case of forced religious conversion. Additionally, the Ambassador and other staff members have reached out to the Rain Forest International School (RFIS), a Yaounde school predominately serving the Protestant missionary community.

In 2004, the Embassy provided a small grant and equipment support to the Islamic Student Union and maintains regular contact with the organization. Another grant was given to support the creation of the Federation of Muslim Women in Cameroon that enabled the organization to host a nation-wide conference that brought together Muslim women from all 10 of the provinces. The Embassy worked closely with the local imams to ensure they have an opportunity to take advantage of Voice of America's new Islamic channel.

Embassy officials met on several occasions with the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Douala, Christian Cardinal Tumi, to discuss various issues including religious freedom, human rights, freedom of the press, and the democratization process. Embassy officials have also met with the imam of the Central Mosque in Yaounde, the Bishop of Maroua, the Archbishop of Yaounde, and various missionary groups active throughout the country to discuss religious freedom and human rights. In addition, during their regular trips within the 10 provinces, Embassy officials continued to meet with local religious officials to discuss any problems with government officials or individuals belonging to other faiths and denominations.

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